THE POPOL-VUH REVISITED:
A COMPARISON WITH MODERN CHAMULA NARRATIVE TRADITION

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I.

It is hardly noteworthy to observe still another case in which folklore behaves with remarkable conservatism over the centuries. What, one might ask, makes it interesting that a contemporary Maya Indian community in southern Mexico preserves much of what we believe to have been in the oral tradition of the Ancient Maya? I believe that the comparison here explored is of more than passing interest, for it deals with perhaps the best known American Indian Classic, the Popol Vuh, of the Ancient Quiché Maya.

The modern document, with which I propose to compare it, is a large corpus of modern Maya narratives from a thriving, expanding monolingual community where oral tradition has yet to face the total impact of literacy, the media, Westernization, or even extensive Mexicanization. The thrust of my paper is therefore not purely academic. Through demonstration of striking parallels in the two bodies of oral tradition, separated by nearly four centuries, I hope to mount a case for accelerated research in an area of the indigenous

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1 This paper was originally presented in a special session, "Myth Ritual and Symbolism in Chiapas Highlands," at the XLI International Congress of Americanists, held in Mexico City, September 2-7, 1974. I gathered the field data for this paper in Chamula, Chiapas, between 1965 and 1969, as a participant in the Harvard Chiapas project, under the direction of Professor Evon Z. Vogt. His encouragement and support throughout my field work are gratefully acknowledged. I also thank Victoria Reifler Bricker, Munro S. Edmonson, Robert Laughlin, Renato Rosaldo, Jr., Alfonso Villa Rojas and James Brent Weibel for their help and criticism at various stages of the development of ideas for this paper.
New World that has potential for a significant contribution to the ranks of world comparative literature and to the national artistic patrimony of Mexico and Guatemala.

II. The Popol Vuh and Maya Oral Tradition

The Popol Vuh probably ranks as the most famous and most studied corpus of American Indian oral tradition ever transcribed. Containing the creation, legends, history and political aspirations of the Quiché Maya nation, it has come down to us as a book-length document. At least part of its contents were almost certainly part of a hieroglyphic book, known as the Manuscript of Utatlán, which is of pre-Columbian origin. With the conquest and Spanish missionary zeal, the hieroglyphic book was destroyed. However, since the material there transcribed was traditionally performed orally rather than read, its contents were retained in considerable detail over several decades and were set down in the Quiché language between 1550 and 1555, using the Roman script which the missionaries had taught to selected members of the community, including, almost certainly, the sons of the ruling patrilineages. This manuscript, known as the Manuscript of the Quiché, has been lost. It still existed in the early 18th century, when it was found, transcribed, and translated to the Spanish by the Dominican Father, Francisco Ximénez. This is known as the Manuscript of Chichicastenango, named for the town in Guatemala where it was found. It was transcribed in two other copies, only one of which survives today; this is the Manuscript of Rabinal. This was transcribed and translated to the French in 1861 by Brasseur de Bourbourg. Since that time, there have been six publications of the original Quiché text; from these have come nearly thirty translations into the languages of the world, including the major Western languages, Russian and Japanese. The most recent and provocative of these efforts is Munro Edmonson’s beatifully annotated and newly translated version (Edmonson 1971), entitled The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala. Edmonson’s major contribution in this new translation is his discovery that the entire work is composed in various forms of the semantic couplet, an exciting insight into Maya poetics. It was with an eye to possibilities of survival of this poetic tradition that I originally wanted to do my fieldwork on a modern Maya community.
The Chamulas speak Tzotzil, which is one of about twenty modern Maya languages. This community of 40,000 people, situated over 300 kilometers from the Quiché homeland, lies near the top of the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico, close to the Guatemalan border. Although both the Quiché and Tzotzil were heir to the distinguished accomplishments of the Classic Maya (300 A. D. — 900 A. D.), there is no reason to believe that the two Maya groups were unified by other than occasional trade relationships during the several centuries preceding the Spanish Conquest. Spanish occupation and missionization of Chamula were carried out in a way much like the process practiced in Guatemala: destruction of the public sector of religious and political organization; token baptism; conversion of high ranking Indian political and religious figures into municipal functionaries who “facilitated” the Spanish presence; with but little effort to change the private, domestic aspect of people’s lives. The later aspect, of course, included their religious beliefs, cosmology and oral traditions. The result was a syncretistic product which was primarily pre-Columbian with substitutions of Spanish labels for key concepts. For example, they continue today to worship the sun in the names of Jesus Christ, the moon in the name of the Virgin Mary, the earthgods in the name of the angels. There is every reason to believe that the oral tradition responded in much the same way to the conquest. Part of the reason for the vitality of Maya traditions is that there are still between two and three million speakers of Maya languages.

My own fieldwork in Chamula, spanning eighteen months, was carried out primarily in Tzotzil, and my goal was to achieve as through an acquaintance with their oral traditions as I could. The material which is the object of this comparison is my corpus of narrative texts; there are 184 texts, amounting to some 2500 type-written pages, which were transcribed from tapes and from written Tzotzil text. I should like to survey only some key points of similarity between this corpus and the Popol Vuh. So as not to imply anything approaching a “pure” corpus of Maya material, I want to clarify that there are in my corpus of narrative texts nearly 40 texts (a fourth of the total corpus) which are either European tale-types or heavily laden with European motifs (the bulk of these are stories of the lives of saints); the rest deal with concepts and subject matter which reflect a remarkably insular Maya world. (See Gossen 1974: 253-346.)
III. Overall Organization

One of the more striking points of similarity between the two bodies of narrative tradition is overall organization. Modern Chamulas, like their pre-Columbian forebears, believe in a four-part creation cycle, of which we are living in the fourth and final phase. This cosmological underpinning of Maya thought emerges as the major organizational principle of both the Popol Vuh and my corpus of modern Chamula material (cf. Edmonson 1971: 7-8). The four major sections of the Popol Vuh explicitly report the events of the four creations, in serial order, proceeding from the “first dawn of order” by the hand of the “Heart of Heaven,” through three destructions and three re-creations, leading to the fourth and final creation. Each cyclical destruction was sent by the Heart of Heaven because he felt that his efforts on behalf of mankind were not appreciated; furthermore, people fought and were evil and did not respect him; hence they were destroyed (see Edmonson 1971: xiv). The basic pattern of content of the narrative moves increasingly close to human behavior throughout the four creations; moving from a time of the gods and initial creation, through a heroic period, and finally into an explicitly historic period in the Fourth Creation, full of the chronicles of battles, migrations, disasters, and bitter competition among lineages for political dominance.

The parallel with modern Chamula material in overall organization is striking. They classify narrative events as belonging to one of two classes, Ancient Words or Recent Words. Recent Words refer to events that happened in the Fourth and final Creation. Within Ancient Words are included the events of the First, Second and Third Creations; each text can be so classified according to serial creations by narrators. So consistent was this taxonomic reference to the four creations that I was able to elicit for nearly every text in my corpus the informant’s opinion as to which one (or several) of the four creations it pertained to. Furthermore, the same criterial attributes apply to the rest of Chamula oral tradition. For example, songs and formal speech are classified as Ancient Words, associated with the First or Second Creations; whereas recent history, gossip, verbal dueling, and other genres which do not explicitly invoke or speak to supernaturals, are classified as Recent Words, associated with the Fourth Creation.
IV. Style

Perhaps the most dramatic similarity between the two traditions is stylistic. The elementary unit of style in both traditions is what Edmonson calls the semantic couplet. It is, by the way, worth noting that it is the discovery of the pervasiveness of this couplet style in the Popol Vuh that makes Edmonson’s translation qualitatively different from previous translations in sublety and precision. In fact, all previous translations have rendered the Quiché text in various forms of prose; it is in fact closer in style and structure to an epic poem.

The type of couplet which Edmonson has demonstrated to be the unit of scansion for the entirety of the Popol Vuh is described by him as follows:

A close rendering of the Quiché inevitably gives rise to semantic couplets, whether they are printed as poetry or as prose. In no case, so far as I can determine, does the Quiché text embellish this relatively primitive poetic device with rhyme, syllabification or meter, not even when it is quoting songs. The form itself, however, tends to produce a kind of 'keying,' in which two successive lines may be quite diverse but must share key words which are closely linked in meaning. Many of these are traditional pairs; sun-moon, day-light, deer-bird, black-white. Sometimes the coupling is opaque in English, however clear it may be in Quiché, as in white light... Always the underlying couplings are strong and more evocative in Quiché than can be rendered in any foreign language, even though much of ancient Quiché remains obscure to us (Edmonson 1971: xii-xiii).

Almost all Chamula narratives can be so scanned into semantic couplets, some with more metrical and phonological complexity than Edmonson recognizes for the Quiché. I have called these elementary structures metaphoric couplets. They can in fact be taken for granted whenever Chamulas speak formally, in whatever genre, for whatever reason. There are two types of metaphoric couplet. The nonparallel metaphoric couplet, simply divided by a caesura, contains a statement and restatement of one idea. Parallel syntax and sound are not present. The semantic element is given once and then repeated, affirmed or answered in a phrase of approximately the same length. These forms are not necessarily stable from one performance to the next. The second type, the parallel metaphoric couplet, is typical of Chamula prayer and song as well as of formal
narratives. It is “bound”, where the nonparallel form is not, in that the two parts of the couplet usually remain together and recombine together as a unit. The first part implies and requires the second part; it syntactically and semantically reiterates the first part. The following passage from a Chamula narrative about the destruction of the First Creation has examples of both forms:

\[
\text{He began to sweep away the sea,} \\
\text{lik la sbe'k'batel ti nab.}
\]

\[
\text{Nonparallel} \\
\text{Metaphoric} \\
\text{Couplets}
\]

\[
\text{When he swept away the sea,} \\
k'alal la ti sbe'k'batel ti nab,
\]

\[
\text{the earth was empty in all directions.} \\
ta huhot sokon banamil.
\]

\[
\text{Now only the land remained, nothing more.} \\
puru sa la banamil kom ta ora.
\]

\[
\text{Only the open plains, nothing more.} \\
pero puru la stanleh.
\]

\[
\text{No mountains,} \\
mu? yuk la višetik,
\]

\[
\text{Parallel} \\
\text{Metaphoric} \\
\text{Couplets}
\]

\[
\text{No people.} \\
mu? yuk la kinsano.
\]

\[
\text{No stones,} \\
mu? yuk la ton,
\]

\[
\text{No woods,} \\
mu? yuk la te? tik,
\]

\[
\text{Only the earth itself.} \\
puru la baq'i banamil.
\]

The stylistic parallels between the two Maya traditions will be apparent in the complete texts given in the following section.²

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² Grammatical parallelism and other forms of dual structure are of course widely distributed techniques of oral poetry and oral narrative. The case made here for similarity between the two Maya traditions may in fact only demonstrate a specialized local expression of a much more widely distributed, perhaps even universally distributed, technique of oral style. See Edmonson (1971: 85-87; 96-99; 103-105; 118-120; 172-173; 178-179; 181-182) for an extensive discussion of this phenomenon.
V. Content

Within Chamula accounts of the First through Third Creations (amounting to 110 texts), there are literally thousands of motifs and at least forty whole narratives which are clearly related to the events of the first three creations in the Popol Vuh. Since the Fourth Creation constitutes the present era in both traditions, narrative episodes associated with it in the two communities are much more diverse from one another than is the case with the first three creations, which apparently make up a reservoir of shared pan-Mayan cosmological and religious beliefs and mythology. In general, the content of the First Creation in both narrative traditions begins with a vast, sometimes redundant, sometimes contradictory, account of the creation of the cosmos, the earth, its land forms and life forms. In the Popol Vuh, the major supernatural force is a spirit called the Heart of Heaven; in Chamula the primary force in the creation of order is Our Father the Sun, who is conceptually equivalent to Jesus Christ. Etiological narratives continue in the Second and Third Creations of both traditions, forming a kind of heroic period, in which early or experimental people, supernaturals and anthropomorphic animals interact and have all manner of adventures, some of which contribute to the reservoir of human culture. Other narrative passages from this period simply report the wondrous and sometimes funny adventures of these not-quite-human and sometimes supernatural characters.

The fundamental similarity which I suggest does not imply that the Chamula corpus approaches a close genetic relationship to the Popol Vuh, in the sense of a major period of contact between the Quiché and Tzotzil people at some time in the distant past. This is neither demonstrably the case from the present evidence, nor is it likely to have occurred from what we know of Maya culture history. Moreover, nearly 300 kilometers separate the territories of the two ethnic groups and their languages are no closer to each other than, say, Spanish and French in the Romance family. For example, historical linguistics suggests that at least 2000 years have passed since Quiché and Tzotzil diverged from a common Proto-Mayan language. Thus, it is the more striking that neither time nor space nor the four centuries of Spanish presence have succeeded in erasing a profound sense of “Maya-ness” in the modern Chamula tradition.

An example of the content similarity between the two traditions will illustrate the case better than paraphrase. The following passage
comes from Edmonson’s translation of the *Popol Vuh*. It relates an event from the heroic period, or Third Creation, in which two brothers have a conflict with some animals who cause vegetation to rise up and fill a plot which they had cleared for planting:

And the next day they went back,
and they returned to their cornfield.
All the trees had been raised up again,
And the bushes.
All the spiny magueys had fastened themselves together again,
When they arrived.
“Who is pulling something on us?”
They said then.
And those who were doing it were all the little animals
And big animals:
Panther,
Jaguar,
Deer,
Rabbit,
Wildcat,
Coyote,
Pig,
Coati,
The little birds
And the big birds
It was they who did it.
It was just one night they did it.
And so then they began their farming again,
Only again the ground did itself,
And the three cutting,
Then they took counsel together there among the felled trees
And furrowed ground.
“Let’s just watch over our cornfield,
Whatever may be happening,
And then we’ll really find out.”
They said then,
When they took counsel together.
And they went back again to the house
“Someone must be pulling something over on us, Grandmothers.
It was a great weed patch
And a great forest again,
That cornfield of ours,
When we got there yesterday, Grandmothers,”
They said then to their grandmother
And to their mother.
“So we are going
To watch over it,
So that they can’t very well do that to us,”
They said.
And so then they got ready,  
   And so then they went back to their felled trees.  
And there they lay in waiting  
   And they hid themselves completely away there.  
Then all the little animals gathered together  
   And each one sat down,  
All the little animals  
   And big animals,  
And it was the heart of the night when they came.  
   They were all talking away as they came.  
And this was their speech: “Rise, walk, tree!  
   Rise, walk, bush!” they said as they came.  
They all lined up under the trees,  
   Under the bushes.  
Then they appeared.  
   And then they showed their faces again.  
The first ones were the panther,  
   And jaguar.  
And they tried to catch them,  
   But they didn’t let them.  
Then there appeared the deer  
   And rabbit.  
And they just barely caught them by the tails  
   And just ripped them off.  
The deer’s tail was just left behind in their hands.  
   So they took away the deer’s tail  
And the rabbit’s tail,  
   Which fragmented their tails (Edmonson 1971: 96-98).

The following Chamula narrative bears striking resemblances to the passage just cited from the Popol Vuh.

Talk About Rabbit and Deer
lo?il yu?un t’ul te?tikalsih³

Long ago when Our Father still lived on earth,
veno, ti vo?ne ti htotik ti k’alal nakal to?oš ta banamil šči?uk sme?e,
   He went into the forest to make his milpa.
bat spas ščob ta te?tik.
He cut down many trees where he was going to make his milpa.
la slomes ?ep te?tik ti bu ta spas ti ščobe.
   So many were the trees he cut.
pero ?ep la slomes ti te?e.
Each day he would work there in the forest,
shunul k’ak’al te ?abteh ta te?tik,

³ Recited by Mateo Méndez Tzotzec, age 60, of Chamula, Chiapas. Chamula narratives do not have “official” titles; thus, the title given was one which the narrator gave as a descriptive label at my request. See Gossen, 1974, for more detailed data on Chamula narrative tradition.
Upon arriving on the following day he would find them standing in place again.

k'älal bat ta yok'omale, va?al k'ot sta skotol ti te?e.

"Why are they thus, all the trees and grasses?"

"Who stood them upright again?"
bu?u tal sva?an?

"Or can they have stood up this way by themselves?" said Our o mi va?i stuk ši la ti htotike.

So Our Father said to himself each day when he arrived at te la ta šk'opoh stuk ti hotik ti k'älal k'ot ta his clearing site.
yabel ti bu la slomes ti te?tike.

Our Father always worked alone;
pero stuktuk la ta s'abteh ti htotike;

He had no helpers.
mu?yuk la svinik.

Thus Our Father would start to work again.
?entonse to htotike lik ?abtehuk
He would again start to fell trees.
lik slomes ti te? štōke

There he worked for a day in the woods,
te ?abteh shumul k'ak'al ta te?tik,
And he felled many trees and vines.

Well, he returned home that afternoon to where he lived.
va?i?un ta mal k'ak'al sutbatel ta sna ti bu nakale.

Then, upon the third day he went again to his milpa.
?entonse ta yōśibal k'ak'al bat ta ?abtel štōk.

He went to fell trees once again,
bat slomes ti te?tik štōke,

But again upon the third day he arrived
pero k'älal k'ot ta yōśibal k'ak'al ti bu
to find them all standing upright again.
ta slomes ti te?e va?al k'ot sta skotol ti te? štōke.

"But why do they right themselves this way?
pero k'uča?al tahmek ta šva?i ti te?e?

"Why don't they die?
k'uča?al mu še?am?

"It is in vain that I work day after day.

"I should probably come to keep watch,
?arleq čiṭal hčabi,

"To see who stands the trees upright,
aver bu?u ta sva?an ti te?e
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“Or can it be that they stand up by themselves?
   o mi ta sva?i stu k tana e.
“Until afternoon I shall work.”
slaheb k’ak’al s?abteh.
   And so into the afternoon he felled trees.
slaheb k’ak’al ta slomes ti te?e.
“Tomorrow I shall come to watch,” said Our Father.
   And so Our Father began once again to cut the trees.
va?i?un ti htoti?e lik la slomes ti te? s?tok
But in the same place as the first day he felled trees.
pero te ?o no?oš la slomes ti bu la slomes ta ba?yle k’ak’ale
   There where he always worked each day.
?a? te s?abteh huhun k’ak’al.
When he arrived each day at the site,
pero k’alal ta sk’ot huhun k’ak’al ti bu ta slomes ti te?e,
   Every day the would arrive only to find them upright.
va?al ta sk’ot sta huhun k’ak’al
“But why oh why, do they right themselves every night?”
he said upon arriving at the milpa site.
si la ti k’alal sk’ot ti bu la slomes ti te?e,
   There he said it to himself as he arrived at the clearing.
te ta sk’opoh stuk ti htoti?e, ti k’alal ta sk’ot ta yabetel.
Then, upon the fourth day he went to check the trees.
?entonse ta čanibal k’ak’al bat s?abt li te?e .
   He went to see if the trees were standing upright.
bat sk’el ti k’usi ta sva?i ti te?e.
There he went to sit down where he had cut the trees.
te bat čoti?uk ti bu la slomes ti te?e.
   There he had hidden near the place where he had felled the
te nak’o?h sba nopol ti bu la slomes ti te?e.
Then, when the rabbit, the deer, the wasp, the blue hornet,
entonse k’alal k’ot ti t’ul, ti te?tikalèih, ti čaksakante?, ti sk’ak’al
and the honey bee arrived,
yate, ti čanul ?akove,
The rabbit and the deer began to talk.
lik la k’opohuk ti t’ul ti te?tikalèih.
Upon arriving at the site of the felled trees,
ti k’alal k’otik ti bu lomem ti te?e;
The deer and rabbit began to talk at the same time.
lik k’opohikuk ti t’ul s?i uk ti te?tikalèih.
They began to say: “Stand up trees!”
lik la yal yukan te?
“Stand up, vines!”
yukan ?ak’.
“Stand up, trees!”
yukan te?

“Stand up vines!”
yukan ?ak'.

“Stand up trees!”
yukan te?

“Stand up, vines!” said the rabbit and the deer.

There they were on all fours,
te la kotolik,
There where the trees were lying.
ti bu ti bu lomem ti le?e.

The wasp, the blue hornet, and the honey bee did not speak.
ti čaksłakante?e, ti sk’ak’al yate, ti čanul jakove my?yuk la sk’opohik.

They only helped in the righting of the trees.

Our Father saw the rabbit and deer arrive
entonse ti htotik k’alal yil k’ot ti t’ul ti te? tikal’ihe
And he got up at once.
va?i la ta ?ora.

Then, when he heard the rabbit and the deer speak,
va?i?un k’alal ya?ik k’opoh ti t’ul ti te?tikal’ihe,
He grabbed the rabbit and deer at once.
bat la sčak ta ?ora ti t’ul ti te?tikal’ihe.

He grabbed the rabbit’s tail,
lah la sčakbe sne ti t’ule,
And cut it off
tu?e’ la;

He pulled the rabbit’s ears,
lah la snitbe sčikin ti t’ule,
When he kept on talking.
ti k’alal syakel ta sk’opohe.

For this reason the rabbit has long ears;
?če o la šal toh nat sčikin li t’ul;
Our Father pulled them.
yu?un la la snit ti htotike.
And so with his tail;
?če la li sne?e;
(Our Father) cut it off.
tu?e’ la.

For this reason the rabbit has a short tail.
?če o la šal toh komkom sne li t’ule.

In such a way he cut off the deer’s tail too.
?če li te?tikal’ihe tu?e’ la sne ?eK.

That is why the deer’s tail is short.
?če o la šal toh komkom sne li te?tikal’ihe.
And his ears were pulled at that time, too;
k'alal ta sèkin ?initbat;
That is why he too has long ears, just like the rabbit.
But the rabbit and the deer have no one to blame but themselves.
pero ?a? la t' smul ti t'ul ti te?tikalčihe.
They stood the trees upright.
For that reason their ears were pulled—
?èè o la šal?initbat sèkinik—
They alone are to blame.
?a? la smul stuk
The wasp only had his stomach crushed,
And so the blue hornet too only had his stomach crushed;
And so also with the honey bee.
sèi?uk čanul ?akov.
Our Father pinched their stomachs with his fingernail.
lah la set'be sè'utak ta smi? yič'ak ti htotike.
That is why the wasp, the blue hornet and the honey bee
?èè o la šal li šaksakante te?e, li sk'ak'al yate li čanul ?akove
have such small middles.
toh bik'it la sè'utik.
Our Father crushed these creatures' stomachs.
pero htotik la la šmiè'be sè'ut tičonetike.
That is why these kinds of insects go around with such tiny
middles.
These animals had only themselves to blame,
pero ?a? la smul stukikti čonetik.
It was their own fault for standing the trees upright.
For, as the rabbit and the deer were talking,
k'alal šyakel ta sk'opohik ti t'ul ti te?tikalčihe,
Quickly the trees rose upright.
hilikl la va?i skotol to te?etike.
When they said, “Stand up, trees!” “Stand up, vines!”
li k'alal lah yal yukan te?e, yukan ?ak'e
Quickly the trees and vines righted themselves.
So it was that Our Father saw the rabbit and the deer stand the
trees upright.
?èè o šal ti htitik lah yol ti t'ul ti te?tikalčiht la sva?an ti te?etike,
For that reason he pulled their ears and pulled (off) their tails.
?èè o la šal la snitbe sèkin sèi?uk sne.
It is the animals' own fault.

pero yu?un a?a ta smul stukik ti êonetike.

Well, after he had pulled the tails and ears of the rabbit, the deer, va?i?un, k'alal lah snitbe sne sêkin ti t'ule ti te?tikalêihe, the wasp, the blue hornet, and the honey bee ti čakslakante?e ti sk'ak'al yate, ti čanul ?akov.

He turned them loose.
lah la skolta batel.

He gave names to them:
lah la yak'be sbi:

The rabbit, the deer, the wasp, the blue hornet, and the honey bee.

t'ul, te?tikalêihe, čakslakante?, sk'ak'al yat, čanul ?akov.

That is why they have names:
?ce o la šal ?oy sbi:

The rabbit, the deer, the wasp, the blue hornet and the honey bee.

li t'ule, li te?tikalêihe, li čakslakante?e, li sk'ak'al yate, li čanul ?akov.

It is because Our Father named them.
yu?un htotì lah yak'be sbi.

But it was long ago that they made the trees stand up.

Such were the rabbit's and deer's devious and naughty tricks.

Thus they quarreled with Our Father.
yu?un šytulanik ti htotik.

They did not want Our Father to make his milpa in the forest.
yu?un mu sk'anik ti ta spas šob ti htotik ta te?etik.

That is why they righted the trees.

But after he had turned the rabbit and deer loose, entonse k'alal lah skolta?el ti t'ul ti te?tikalêihe,
Our Father began to work once again.
lik ?abtehuk ti htotik.

He began to fell the trees.
lik srokes ti te?etik.

But the trees and vines no longer righted themselves.
pero mu?yuk ša la bu šva?i ti te?e ti ?ak'e.
He managed to prepare his milpa.
lah la spas ti šöbe.

He succeeded in sowing his milpa.
lah la s'ùn ti šöbe.
This tale of course is a widely distributed Meso-American tale-type (Gossen 1974: 308), but it nevertheless occurs with striking similarity in detail and sequence of motifs in the two Maya traditions under consideration here. This is emphasized by the explicit Third Creation time association of the text in the two traditions. There are at least forty such whole tale parallels in the Chamula corpus.

VI. Function

It would be useful if there were ways in which one might explore actual social context of performance and social function in the case of the Popol Vuh. This of course is not possible except insofar as informed inference can take us. Taking such liberty, however, I believe that a case may be made for both the ancient Quiché and the modern Chamula oral traditions as major information reservoirs for their societies. We have reason to believe that the Popol Vuh was never performed in its entirety, although it was so transcribed. Its segments were perhaps used and invoked under appropriate social circumstances by priests or political leaders, and perhaps to a lesser extent by peasant corn farmers. It apparently existed as a reference work in hieroglyphic form, but probably was performed orally, or re-created orally, as appropriate occasions arose. As the document itself suggests in the preamble to the account of the First Creation.

This is the root of the former word.
Here is Quiché by name.
Here we shall write then,
We shall start out then, the former words,
And beginnings
And the taproots
Of everything done in the Quiché town,
The tribe of the Quiché people...
We shall save it
Because there is no longer
A sight of the Book of Counsel,
A sight of the bright things come
from beside the sea,
The description of the shadows,
A sight of the bright life, as it is called.
There was once the manuscript of it,
And it was written long ago,
Only hiding his face is the reader of it,
The meditator of it.
Great was its account
And its description
Of when there was finished
The birth
Of all heaven
And earth:
The four creations,
The four humiliations...

(Edmonson 1971: 3-8)

A comprehensive picture of Chamula as the chosen people of the Sun Creator is also revealed in their corpus of narratives; however, where their Ancient Maya forebears had both a form of writing and a small upper priestly class which was literate, Chamulas carry and transmit their complex narrative tradition entirely by oral means. Nevertheless, basic parallel functions in the two traditions may, I believe, be assumed. In the case of Chamula, access to the information is more diffused in the society at large than it probably was in Quiché antiquity, a time when there was an established upper class which no doubt had a vested interest in controlling the form in which the oral tradition reached the people. The Chamula corpus clearly parallels the Quiché narrative in providing a richly detailed account of the four creations of man, and all of the triumphs and misfortunes which mankind has so far experienced. Both sets of narratives also imply great concern for their value in socializing the youth and legitimizing the prevailing social order.

VII. Conclusion

Without reiterating or summarizing, I want to conclude by saying, simply, that I believe there exists in the Maya region of Mexico and Guatemala a sufficiently large and important corpus of contemporary oral literature—much of it of nearly epic proportion—to warrant a considerable investment of time, money and energy to record it and raise it to the national and international stature which it deserves. Such an enterprise, at present, would not be one of “salvage folklore” in an area threatened with cultural anihilation. Rather, it would record a part of the living oral traditions of several million people who live in viable Maya communities today. To allow them a voice in the contemporary literature of the Americas seems necessary and fitting, not only because their forebears were responsible for the Popol Vuh, but
also because the Maya, numerically speaking, are a significant cultural presence in Central America. Here is a clear opportunity for Mexico and Guatemala to bring to the light of day a contemporary indigenous literature which will surely earn the love and respect of sensitive people everywhere. One is reminded of the Kalevala, Finland’s national epic poem, which was synthesized from oral sources in the nineteenth century and is now a landmark among the folk literatures of the world. The analogy is clear.

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